

Terrorism: Bin Ladin's Network (C)

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Khartoum-based Islamic radical Usama Bin Ladin has emerged as a major player on the international terrorism scene, with his farflung network of businesses and associates used to finance and facilitate militant and terrorist activity. Though he exemplifies Sudanese state support for terrorism, Bin Ladin's freedom of action makes him a threat in his own right to Western and moderate Arab interests. (S/NF)

Man behind the myth

A denaturalized Saudi citizen, Bin Ladin has parlayed his fortune (estimated at \$50 million), international network of businesses and associates, and patronage to extremists into near-legendary status in the terrorism underworld. But most reporting suggests Bin Ladin does not directly oversee his network and probably is exploited by well-paid employees, associates, and other beneficiaries of his wealth. (S/NF)

Speculation that Bin Ladin has left, or will soon leave, Sudan has continued since the public allegations of Khartoum's role in the June assassination attempt against Egyptian President Mubarak by the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. Bin Ladin has been a generous patron to the Gama'a and had employed one of the masterminds of the Mubarak attack. Cairo considers his continued presence in Sudan a serious threat to Egypt's security. Despite pressure on Sudan to curb Bin Ladin's activity, however, it seems unlikely Khartoum would force Bin Ladin to leave permanently. Bin Ladin reportedly travels on a Sudanese diplomatic passport and enjoys a personal relationship with NIF leader Hassan al-Turabi; the Sudanese Government also benefits financially from Bin Ladin's presence. (S/NF)

Bin Ladin's businesses

Bin Ladin launched his first enterprises during the final years of the Afghan war with the former Soviet Union. Some of his companies are no longer active; others may have served as temporary fronts for his radical activities. His two primary businesses, Wadi al-Aqiq and Al-Hijra Construction, are based in Khartoum and employ a wide range of foreign nationals. Elements of the Sudanese regime are involved in Bin Ladin's business dealings; his construction company routinely receives government contracts, and his companies reportedly provide cover for some NIF intelligence activity. (S/NF)

In addition to his business network, Bin Ladin controls a housing complex just south of Khartoum that shelters several hundred Arab veterans of the Afghan war. Indoctrination and some training doubtless take place on the compound. More important, it affords members of extremist groups, particularly from North Africa, a safe place to congregate and prepare for operations elsewhere. (S/NF)

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How the network works

Most of Bin Ladin's money probably is siphoned off by employees and associates with their own agendas. His network of business associates and acquaintances in the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe facilitates the channeling of his money to groups, NGOs, and individuals involved in radical or terrorist activities, with or without his knowledge. Money transfers from one of his Khartoum-based businesses to individuals or firms abroad tend to be small and difficult to tie directly to terrorist activity. (S/NF)

Bin Ladin appears to have a few pet projects that he may be engaged in more directly, including support to Saudi oppositionists, Arab veterans of the Afghan war, the mujahidin in Bosnia, and the Egyptian Gama'at. (S/NF)

Results

Although he may not be a dynamic Islamic leader or even a shrewd businessman, Bin Ladin's generous patronage to radicals has served to fund or facilitate incidents of international terrorism. Reporting has linked him-- sometimes circumstantially--to a number of attacks and known terrorists:

- The 1994 attacks against cinemas in Amman, Jordan.
- Ramzi Yousef's Manila-based plots in January 1995 to bomb several US airliners and assassinate the Pope.
- The June 1995 assassination attempt against Mubarak.
- The summer 1995 bombings in France by Algerian extremists.
- The November bombing of the OPM/SANG building in Saudi Arabia. (S/NF)

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